

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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CREATIVE CHARACTERIZATION.

THE magazine of today has little room for character description.

True, the demand for vivid portrayal of character remains—but it must be met by indirect methods.

While this statement is overbroad, inasmuch as there are exceptional instances, it does summarize the situation, particularly as regards the writer who is on the outer edge, trying to break into print. Authors who have attained rank and reputation are granted privileges which should not mislead the comparative novice.

In some respects, at any rate, the modern tendency toward the elimination of such descriptive passages is to be commended. Vividness of character drawing and convincingness of atmosphere are in demand as much as ever; the restriction is that they must be secured with economy of words. More skill is required for presenting a clearly rounded picture in a single sentence than for producing the same effect by pages of detailed description. In the ordinary story of action, a brief description when the character is introduced, and an occasional touch designed to bring out salient points in the course of the narrative are usually sufficient.

Character drawing is fundamentally a matter of visualization on the part of the story-teller. If he has a clear picture in his own mind and fair facility in expression, the complete picture is likely to be conveyed to the reader in ways almost too subtle for analysis—even though no direct description is employed.

It may be said that there are two methods of characterization. The distinction between them is rather intangible and there are all degrees of overlapping, but they may be broadly designated as the "outline" method and the "creative" method.

The outline method takes advantage of a psychological fact which a little introspective analysis will make clear to the student. This fact is that when an object is brought to one's notice an image of it immediately springs into existence in the mind. We do not think in words—the normal habit is to think in pictures. Thus.

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the idea of taking a trip into the mountains may occur to me. Analyzing the thought, I find that it assumed the form of a vision of myself riding on a train, then standing amid typical mountain scenery. If I were to dwell on the subject more in detail, I should vision myself packing a suit-case, buying a ticket at the station, entering a train, and going through the whole experience—vaguely and disconnectedly, but still in picture form.

Occultists assert that to the clairvoyant vision thoughts are actually things—creations in an octave of matter that lies outside the range of ordinary physical senses. Thus, when I think of a horse, an image of that horse appears floating before me; if I think of standing on top of a certain cliff, I send an image of myself to the top of that cliff; if I write a novel and vividly picture the characters, they act out the story like puppets on a stage before me. These images, it is stated, are usually vague, and melt away when the attention is withdrawn; but if projected by a clear, definite thinker, they may persist in etheric matter for some time, particularly if the mind occasionally returns to them and dwells on them.

It is not necessary for any one to accept this interesting speculation, though it will appeal forcibly to most writers. At least, it forms a good working hypothesis. The writer who conceives his characters with strong precision is likely to impress clear pictures on the minds of others.

But it is by taking advantage of this process as it occurs among his readers that the author is enabled to accomplish results with economy of words. If I say "bird," hardly a reader of these lines but will have a mental picture, more or less defined, of such a creature. But now note how much more vivid is the image that springs into being if I say "chicken." Our conception of a bird includes a canary, an ostrich, and hundreds of other types, though if an intense effort is made to give the concept definiteness of outline, each thinker will tend to visualize the type with which he or she is most familiar. But it is easier to picture a chicken than a bird, because the concept is less inclusive. Similarly, it is easier to picture a rooster than a chicken—easier to picture a fighting cock than a rooster. The greater the limitations implied by the word employed the more definite is the image.

The clever author, knowing that when he uses a certain word it evokes an image, merely furnishes suggestions and the picturizing faculty of his reader does the rest. True, the same word does not call up the same picture in every mind. The word "man" to me tends to evoke the image of a typical American, garbed in latter-day clothes. The same word to a Japanese would suggest a specimen of his own race. To a naked savage it would mean some one

like himself. The point is, however, that in each case the word, if understood, calls up an image.

The principle applies also to incidents. A brief statement may evoke a distinct picture. Thus:

The chicken ran right in front of the automobile.

This may seem a description of the incident, but in reality it is merely a suggestion upon which the reader instinctively elaborates. The word "chicken" forms, as it were, an outline into which flows the reader's concept of whatever type of chicken he is most familiar with. Similarly, the picture of an automobile, of the design chiefly familiar to the individual reader, will fill in the outline suggested by that word.

The phrase "ran right in front," etc., suggests the action of the chicken; but this is as far as the incident is described by the author. It is almost certain that further details have been supplied by the proclivity of the reader's mind—like nature—to abhor a vacuum. For instance, nothing is mentioned in the sentence about the scene; but it is probable that in every resulting mental image a definite road has been placed under the wheels of the automobile, and there will be a more or less hazy impression of surroundings, probably in the country, as an appropriate background for the chicken. Moreover, nothing has been said as to whether the machine was occupied, or whether it was in motion. Yet it is probable that any reader's conceptions will include at least one occupant; also that the car, as well as the chicken, will appear in motion.

Of course, this method is dependent upon an audience familiar with the objects symbolized by the few suggestive words. For greater precision, more detail may be employed, but the power of evoking images contained in a simple grouping of nouns and verbs is immense—all because of the universal picture-making tendency of the human mind.

The easy method of characterization, thus viewed, consists merely in exercising care that the right outline be presented. The first requirement is that it must be an outline which all probable readers are capable of filling with detail. When I say: "The tramp picked up a stone and threw it at the dog," I am reasonably safe in assuming that my readers will have concepts ready to fill the outlines suggested by the nouns and verbs. But if I say: "The maenad selected a barong and cast it at the criosphinx," in the average mind no picture would be ready to flow into the outline. It is obvious, therefore, that more description would be needed in connection with such an incident than with the first.

Following is a characteristic bit of outline description:

Banks was a typical broker, alert, complacent, and businesslike in appearance.

Though this is a mere outline picture, it is likely to evoke a fairly clear image, because the average reader has a set of concepts ready to be called up by the nouns and adjectives. The word "broker" alone brings before the mind an image. The word "alert" emphasizes a certain quality in this particular broker's make-up; "complacent" emphasizes another, and "businesslike" still another. Even though our image of a broker would include these typical qualities, specific mention brings them into sharper distinctness.

The weakness of such description is that it would never suggest an image for a reader brought up in the wilderness, who had never seen a business man, and knew nothing of brokers.

This is the type of characterization chiefly found in short-stories and novels of the day. It is practical and may be mastered by a fair amount of practice. But since it depends upon images already present in the reader's mind, and because it fails if such images be not already implanted, we may safely say that it is not *creative*. It does not compare with such actual creation of character as may be found in the work of the masters, past or present.

Consider, for instance, the characters in a novel by Balzac, Dickens, or Thackeray. The large majority of their characters are types with which the average modern American reader is unacquainted. They force their own individuality upon the mind, no more depending upon our previous conceptions than would a visitor who entered by the door of the room instead of the door of literature. So far as our impressions of them are concerned, they are actual, breathing persons. Instead of depending upon our previous conceptions, they help, just as do new acquaintances, to extend them. This may be illustrated. Suppose that, taking the broker description for a model, I say:

He was a typical Parisian tradesman of the early nineteenth century.

Now this outline is unlikely to evoke in the mind of the everyday reader an image approaching in clarity that aroused by the broker description; for comparatively few have any ready-prepared concepts regarding Parisian tradesmen, particularly of a past period. But if we have read, for example, Balzac's Cesar Birotteau, the description at once evokes a clear image. To us, the typical Parisian tradesman will be a copy of Cesar Birotteau. If a further limitation be added—say that "his figure was spare and his eyes piercing"—our pictured tradesman will still be a Cesar Birotteau, grown thin and piercing of eye.

It is evident that in addressing an audience acquainted with Balzac's hero we are safe in employing an outline description; but what of Balzac, who built up for us an acquaintance with a man with whose type we were not familiar? His feat surely belongs

to the realm of creation. It would seem—at least to an admirer of Balzac—that Cesar could have been no more real to the Parisians who were familiar with his like than he is to readers of a later day and a different land.

How does the master thus *create* characters, so that they are independent of previous concepts that may exist in the mind of the reader?

The secret, of course, defies perfect analysis. But we may be sure that such an author knows his story people thoroughly—he knows the types from which they arose and possesses a discerning eye for essential details in picturing them. We may be sure that he does not feel that he is “making up” what they say and do as he goes along. Within his mind they are living entities. They can no more do or say an uncharacteristic thing than can people of the real world. If such a character so much as winks an eye, he does it in his own peculiar manner, and if the author sees fit to mention the action, he takes pains to make known the manner of its performance.

The term “outline” as here employed may require a little definition. It implies a limitation—an outer boundary. It may *include* a number of objects, but it *excludes* many more. The term “bird” is definite to a certain degree; it includes a great many species; but it excludes horses, sunflowers, clouds—an infinity of things. The term “chicken” excludes all these and many creatures besides—canaries and ostriches, for instance; but it may include roosters, pullets and baby chicks of all sorts—to say nothing of its implication in the slang of the day! If we employ the word “hen,” the boundary is greatly narrowed; if we say “white leghorn hen,” we exclude a hundred other types; and if we say “a white leghorn hen with one eye,” we have come close to individualizing her. The schoolmen used to say that “every angel is his own species”; so each individual is the only person of his or her kind in the world; the things which define the individual are those things that no other person possesses in the same combination.

The keynote of vivid characterization, then, is limitation. With each evidence of what our subject is *not*, some of the haze that may have lingered about the reader's concept is cleared up. For example, I may make the following assertion:

That is a person.

This statement excludes hundreds of concepts, but the outlines of the mental image evoked, although rigidly shutting out natural objects, lower animals, and the like, include men, women, and children of all types, civilized, barbarian, savage. We may make the

outline tremendously more definite by saying:

That person is a man.

At once the nebulous concept vaguely takes form—because women and children are excluded, though still we do not see the subject well enough to determine whether he is savage or cultured, whether white, black, or yellow, whether clad in fig leaves, a 1916 fall model, or a Roman toga, whether he is short, tall, fat, or lean. But in a few words we may bring the outlines into immeasurably greater distinctness, thus:

The man is a tall, well-developed college graduate.

This eliminates the fig leaf and the toga, the lean, fat, black, and yellow men, for if we employ the term college graduate without further limitation the reader will understand us to mean the *typical* college graduate. The outline is really quite definite—as definite as would be the outline of a real man seen from a moderate distance. It is only the intimate, close-up details that the reader would not now find clear. The features and expression of the subject are nebulous, as are also the color of his hair and his style of dress, his name, his station in life. This vagueness can be cleared by adding a few more limitations:

That tall, well-developed college graduate with fair hair and a boyish, good-natured face is Alfred Jones, son of the wealthy Joshua Jones.

For ordinary purposes this would be sufficient limitation to begin with. But it has not brought the character fully to life. There are many who, except for the minor point of the name, would fit the same description. It will remain for his conversation and manner, as they are brought out in the story, to make him really individual—to picture him as the *one* person of his kind.

Every time a fictional character says or does something which no other person could or would have done, his outlines become more clearly defined. Poor characterization is often a result of failure to realize this one point. The writers are prone to let their characters say the natural, expected thing, in given circumstances. The result is that they become too typical. While it is true that great fictional characters are almost invariably typical of their class, it is also true that the slight variations from type have made them great. David Harum is extremely typical in his broad outlines; but his little individual twists and quirks of character and manner are what make him a reality to be remembered.

When Diogenes told the patronizing Alexander that the only favor he desired was that the king should stand out of his sunlight, this remark alone served to define the philosopher. He is perhaps the one man in the world who would have made such a reply.

For vividness of characterization, then, watch for opportunities to present your story people as acting differently from the way that any one else would have acted in similar circumstances. It is easy to imagine the average wife, when told that her husband has run away with another woman, crying: "The wretch—I'll never forgive him!" or words to that effect. It would hardly matter whether her married life up to the point of the tragedy had been blissful or the opposite. But this situation might readily serve as an opportunity for a fiction heroine to step out of the typical class and become a distinct individual. Her reply might be: "Very well—ask him if he'd prefer to have his trunk sent on, too."

It is well, so far as possible, to let one's characters act otherwise than they would be expected to act. This, of course, is advice that must be followed with judgment. Unless gifted with intuition, a writer who attempts it will run the risk of making his characters inconsistent, if not impossible. But unexpectedness gives life and spice both to the characterization and to the story as a whole. The man who loves where others would be vindictive, the woman who smiles where most would give way to tears, the child who fights when he might be expected to run, the wife who forgives where others would condemn, the saint who swears, the thief who prays, the dog that laughs, the woman who defies convention—all these have achieved individuality. Good or evil, they are interesting because they have ceased to be purely typical. When we call to mind Mr. Micawber, Pere Goriot, Madame Bovary, Becky Sharp, Topsy, Anna Karenina, Tom Sawyer—we picture not merely typical people but individuals, as distinct from others as those we meet in daily life. And it may be asserted that they have been brought to life by this one device, however unconsciously the author applied it—the device of putting them into situations where their characteristic traits might become manifest in thought, speech, or action.

The fiction writer is often advised to study human nature; but a great deal depends on how this study is carried out and systematized. It helps greatly in our characterization to observe people with whom we come in contact, particularly those with marked individual characteristics, and to make an effort to differentiate between those things they say and do which are typical and those which betray their variation from the type. In studying examples of fiction, note similar devices. Putting an unexpected remark in the mouth of a character is often the author's deliberate method of making that character individual.

*How oft in authors' "characters" we see
"Things that ne'er were, nor are, nor e'er will be"!*

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